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ABSTRACT

The notion of "Personal Writing" has come under sustained attack from several different directions and for a variety of reasons, yet it is a concept that still retains usefulness for writing instructors. One problem with personal writing is that frequently students do not like it or feel it invades their privacy, despite the traditional wisdom, which asserts that students avidly enjoy it. Secondly and most importantly, the term itself is difficult to define. In defining the term, it can be asserted that writing is equivalent, in fundamental ways, with thought. Also, all thought and knowledge is inescapably personal by its very essence, as attested by Michael Polanyi's insights. The implication is, then, that all writing, to the extent that it is thoughtful, is personal writing, suggesting further ramifications. Students at St. Cloud University in Minnesota carried out research to demonstrate that students should not be assigned personal writing. The responses discovered by the students through their project had much in common with William Perry's scheme of intellectual development, which defines "commitment" and "relativism." "Truth," as defined by Polanyi, is known only as "commitment," a determination that is inescapably personal. Thus, personal writing is not immature, and it is not outgrown; instead, it is by definition writing that is committed to finding and speaking the truth. (HB)

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March, 1992

For "Can These Words Be Saved" (Session E-3)
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SHOULD WE OUTGROW PERSONAL WRITING? POLANYI AND PERRY ON REALITY, TRUTH, AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

I think the words "Personal Writing" are now in some real peril. I see them under attack from several different directions and for a variety of reasons. I think these words are worth saving.

What's problematical about personal writing? For one thing, a lot of students don't like it. I had a group of sophomores last year who were sufficiently energized by their antipathy to personal writing that they did a research project to demonstrate that they shouldn't be asked to do it. They reviewed some of the literature, including Britton and Hillocks, devised a questionnaire, and surveyed a freshman class. They found, among other things, that 56% of the students surveyed did not like writing about themselves. Drawing on both their own experience and the responses of five people they interviewed in some depth, they analyzed this dislike as follows: "We felt this was an invasion of our privacy. We considered our personal lives just that, personal." My students felt that they were being required, in these writing situations, to share their "innermost feelings with total strangers," and they felt that writing situations that seemed designed to evoke personal writing would make writers uncomfortable volunteering details and would therefore generate writing that was taciturn and impoverished in detail. Furthermore, they believed that these writers would be tempted to fabricate untruthful text about themselves, thereby compromising both their personal integrity and the quality of their writing. Finally, they noted that one

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student had commented that she already knows herself and is more interested in learning of other things.

There's a lot of food for thought here. For one thing, although this study was seriously flawed, I trust its general finding that a lot of students are resistant to "Personal Writing"--whatever that means. That, of course, is one of the problems. In fact, it's probably the central problem in my talking through this today. But more about definition later.

This finding challenges the conventional wisdom of most of us who are on either side of the ongoing debate over personal writing. Nearly everybody normally assumes that students like--in fact, prefer--personal writing. Typically a proponent of Personal Writing begins with this assumption and argues that Personal Writing promotes intellectual growth by helping a student begin to achieve some fluency that then transfers with a shift to a more impersonal, formal academic discourse. And typically an opponent of Personal Writing begins with this assumption and argues that Personal Writing retards intellectual growth by failing to challenge students to move beyond a comfortable, familiar, even solipsistic form of expressive discourse. But most of us, most of the time, invite or at least permit a kind of Piagetian assumption that personal writing is a less mature form of discourse, a kind of crawling-before-walking that writers go through in the process of "decentering" and moving toward impersonal, formal academic discourse. Even James Britton's seminal work invites this assumption. But if personal writing is the comfortable, familiar unchallenging mode of discourse, why are so many students resistant to it? And why are writing teachers so often frustrated in

working with students on writing projects that are expressive? And why, if it's the easy writing, do so many sophomores, say, do it so badly? Why did the one older student my students interviewed report (against the trend of the other five students who were traditional-age freshmen) that she found assignments that evoked a personal response the most satisfying assignments. And, finally, why is this outlier's response typical of that of older writers I have met in my writing classes and in Writing Project workshops?

I'd like to circle back to the problem of definition for a minute. As a first step, I want to define writing as equivalent, in fundamental, essential ways, with thought. I'm asserting a substantial equivalence here, of course, not a total equivalence: a Venn diagram with two circles that overlap substantially but not totally. On the one hand, we have thoughts that we do not--and, indeed, cannot--articulate. As Polanyi demonstrates convincingly in a variety of ways, we know more than we can tell. And, on the other hand, we have all seen writing that is essentially thought-less. But, for most practical purposes, I want to assert a substantial equivalence between writing and thought.

There shouldn't be too many people uncomfortable with this definition of writing. But next I define all thought, all knowledge, as inescapably personal by its very essence. In taking this step, I'm invoking Betsy Wallace's paper and, with her, relying on Michael Polanyi's epistemological insight. For example, Polanyi says in the preface to Personal Knowledge (pp. vii-viii),

> I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill. Skilful knowing and doing is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skilful achievement, whether practical or theoretical. We may then be said to become "subsidiarily aware" of these particulars within our "focal Awareness": of the coherent entity that we achieve. Clues and tools are things used as such and not observed in themselves. They are made to function as extensions of our bodily equipment and this involves a certain change of our own being. Acts of comprehension are to this extent irreversible, and also non-critical. For we cannot possess any fixed framework within which the re-shaping of our hitherto fixed framework could be critically tested.
>
> Such is the personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding. But this does not make our understanding subjective. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; a contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge.

Now comes the conclusion--and it's a leap many people may not want to make: all writing, to the extent that it is thoughtful (thought-full?), is personal writing.

Suppose we accept, at least provisionally, the proposition that all writing is personal writing, ascribing a Polanyian definition to the word "personal." What are the ramifications?

First, we have to let go of the assumption that personal writing is a kind of proto-discourse that novice writers eventually outgrow in the course of their intellectual development. In fact, we are now challenged to re-examine what

we mean by intellectual development.

There's a startling congruity between the responses my students found and the patterns that William Perry and his associates at Harvard found in their massive longitudinal studies of intellectual growth. As I draw out this comparison, notice how the close-to-the-chest rigidity of the younger writers resonates with the earliest stages of the Perry scheme. Rather than being irrepressibly, garrulously expressive writers and learners, these people are fiercely committed to a just-the-facts mode of writing and learning: "We considered our personal lives just that, personal." They see no relevance or value in self-reflection--never mind self-expression: "She already knows herself and is more interested in learning of other things."

Compare this with Position 1, which Perry calls "Dualism." "Authorities know, and if we work hard, read every word, and learn Right Answers, all will be well" (p. 79). Perry further summarizes Dualism as follows: "Division of meaning into two realms--Good versus Bad, Right versus Wrong, We versus They, All that is not success is Failure, and the like. Right answers exist somewhere for every problem, and the authorities know them. Right answers are to be memorized by hard work. Knowledge is quantitative. Agency is experienced as 'out there' in Authority, test scores, the Right job" (79).

Perry and his colleagues identified nine different positions where they found people located in their cognitive and ethical development. Between the positions are transitions, represented by questions indicating crises of growth where the person's interpretive frame of reference is challenged in new

ways. Growth, or sometimes what Perry calls retreat or escape, occurs in response to these crises. Positions 2 and 3 are defined as Dualism modified by Multiplicity: the person holding a dualistic view is challenged by the persistent uncertainties in the world and by the diversity of opinion among experts and concludes that, although absolute Truth is still attainable, she or he does not yet have full possession of it. From this position, the person may move to either Position 4a or 4b or both. A person at 4a has concluded that as long as the absolute Truth is not known, then every assertion has equal value. So anything goes. If we're in a classroom environment, everybody gets an A. Or, as we say in Minnesota, "Whatever!" A person at 4b has concluded that while all assertions may have equal value, there are different qualities of argument for these assertions.

The transition from Position 4 seems to be the most crucial of all the transitions. This is the encounter with Relativism: the ultimate unknowability of the absolute Truth. At this point three developmental directions are common. If the development is in the direction of further intellectual growth and maturity, there is the beginning of an acceptance of personal responsibility in the face of contingency and indeterminacy. In Perry's words, the person concludes, "You have to think about your thinking." The other two developmental directions at this point are Retreat, characterized by a denial of Relativism and a regression back to a dualistic position, or Escape, which Perry describes as alienation and abandonment of responsibility, an exploitation of multiplicity and relativism to avoid commitment. Perry describes continued growth from Position 5 as evolving commitments: a series of new commitments made in the face of indeterminacy

and contingency--and a recognition that the epistemological and moral ground is not only indeterminate but is also in constant flux, requiring continual reassessment of commitment and the making of new and deeper commitments.

There's only one word in Perry that gives me persistent problems: Relativism. That word seems to me an unfortunate choice. Contingency and indeterminacy seem more appropriate, and in fact I've just now been using them in preference to relativism to describe the problematical condition we face as knowers. Perry's use of the term "Relativism" leaves him vulnerable to the charge that he holds a position something like 4a, and he clearly does not. He describes the Position 9 view as follows: "I must be wholehearted while tentative, fight for my values yet respect others, believe my deepest values right yet be ready to learn. I see that I shall be retracing this whole journey over and over--but, I hope, more wisely." Although the word "Commitment" doesn't appear here, Position 9 is the final stage in what Perry describes as the developing and deepening of commitment. In "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning," Perry make his reliance on Polanyi explicit in discussing the contribution of commitment:

> [I]t is in one's way of affirming Commitments that one finds at last the elusive sense of "identity" one has searched for elsewhere, fearful lest Commitments might narrow and compromise the very self that only the investment of care can create. It is in the affirmation of Commitments that the themes of epistemology, intellectual development, ethics, and identity merge. Knowing that "such and such is true" is an act of personal commitment (Polanyi, 1958) from which all else follows. Commitments structure the relativistic world by providing focus in it and affirming the inseparable relation of the knower and the known. (97)

Perry's use of "Commitment" here gives us an important link back to Polanyi and to a better handle on the problem of Relativism. Polanyi defines truth in

terms of a personal commitment, arguing in Personal Knowledge that "truth is but the external pole of belief" (286) and that "according to the logic of commitment, truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it (305). Truth, by Polanyi's definition, is bipolar: there is a known as well as a knower. At another point, Polanyi says, "Truth lies in the achievement of a contact with reality--a contact destined to reveal itself further by an indefinite range of yet unforeseen consequences" (147).

But the determination of the truth is inescapably personal. There is no external authority, either in the form of empirical data or in the form of some socially constructed norm, that can decide for us. I find Polanyi so eloquent on this point that I want to quote him one more time: "The only sense in which I can speak of the facts of the matter is by making up my own mind about them. In doing so I may rely on an existing consensus, as a clue to the truth, or else may dissent from it, for my own reasons. In either case my answer will be made with universal intent, saying what I believe to be the truth, and what the consensus ought therefore to be. This is the only sense in which I can speak of the truth....This position is not solipsistic, since it is based on a belief in an external reality and implies the existence of other persons who can likewise approach the same reality. Nor is it relativistic....There remains therefore only one truth to speak about" (316).

I'm convinced that we've all had it backwards when we've said that personal writing is an immature form of college-level writing. If you find Perry persuasive, you may conclude that even the idiosyncratically expressive forms of personal writing that we've all gotten from students--the embarrassingly,

irrelevantly personal stuff--represents an intermediate stage of development analogous to Perry's Position 4a--certainly not Position 1. And writing that is truly personal--not writing that is simply idiosyncratic or solipsistic--is, by definition, the writing that is committed--committed to finding and speaking the truth. There is good reason to resist this kind of committed writing. This commitment is hazardous in many ways. Two ways have to do with the bipolar nature of commitment that Polanyi talks about. First, the reality we reach for at any moment may be an illusion--we may be wrong. And second, in extending ourselves in making a commitment, even when we are right, we are exposing ourselves. How many 20-year-old college students are comfortable doing this? How many of us are comfortable doing it?

We need to acknowle to ourselves and to our students that personal writing is difficult and dangerous stuff, not deprecate it as the easy stuff. We need to give our students permission to be fearful of this hazardous commitment--and at the same time encourage them (in the radical, literal sense of the word) to take the risk of asserting their integrity as an individual center of coherence and rationality, personally responsible for mediating and making sense of their world--of empirical facts on the one hand and social constructs on the other hand.

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